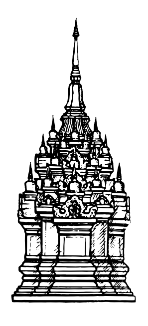
A Guide to a Proper Buddhist Funeral



E-mail: bdea@buddhanet.net
Web site: www.buddhanet.net

Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.

A Guide to a Proper Buddhist Funeral



Koperasi Buddhisme Malaysia Berhad
(Malaysian Buddhist Co-operative Society Berhad)
10a, Jalan 21/18, Sea Park,
46300 Petaling Jaya, Selangor.
Tel/Fax: 03-78752808

Preface

One of the first things the Koperasi Buddhisme Malaysia Berhad did when it was registered was to conduct a survey on the services that the Buddhist community felt were lacking. Many suggestions were made, but top of the list was the need for a Proper Buddhist Funeral Service.

The Buddhist community in Malaysia is comprised mainly of ethnic Chinese. Though Buddhism is not alien to the Chinese, the practice as it is practised in Malaysia is somewhat of a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Through the practise of this tri-ism, it is not surprising to find that for one who is born a 'Buddhist' and brought up a 'Buddhist' to finally meet his end as a Taoist.

But why is this so?

Firstly, since Buddhism is a way of life, its concern is more with moral conduct and the quest for enlightenment. The only mention of regulated rite and ritual is in the Vinaya and that, too, is solely for the discipline of its monks.

Secondly, Buddhism teaches that upon death what is left is only matter and how the remains are treated is normally of no direct consequence to the well being of the departed.

This, however, does not mean that we can act disrespectfully towards the bodily remains of those who had showered their love on us. As an act of gratitude

we should perform meaningful rites such as carrying out meritorious deeds in their memory.

Though the Buddha did not lay down rules on proper rites of passage for the laity, neither did he specifically prohibit his lay disciples, who are still very much attached to worldly possessions, from outwardly expressing their respect and gratitude, especially in times of death and separation.

> *'Hinder not yourselves, Ananda, by honouring the remains of the Tathagata. … There are wise men, among the nobles, the brahmins, the heads of houses, who are firm believers in the Tathagata; and they will do due honour to the remains of the Tathagata.'*
> *D.ii,142*

Lastly, it is difficult to find organisations providing such service. With the exception of some Mahayanist temples who are sincere enough to guide their devotees on Proper Buddhist Funerals, many are left to the mercy of unscrupulous undertakers and 'experts' who are, more often than not, happy to introduce a bucket full of superstitions in the name of Buddhism.

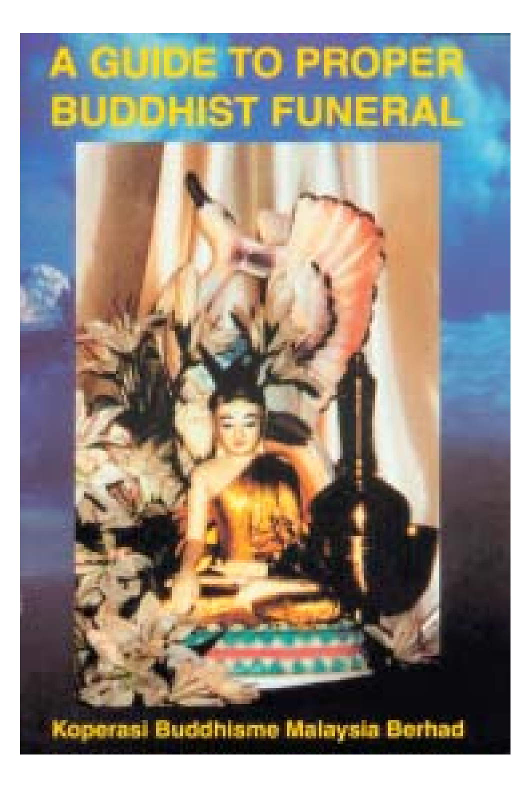
The Theravadins, too, are not spared from this predicament. In fact they are worse off and many who seek services from Sri Lankan, Thai or Burmese Buddhist temples are often frowned upon by family elders as practising something 'un-Chinese'.

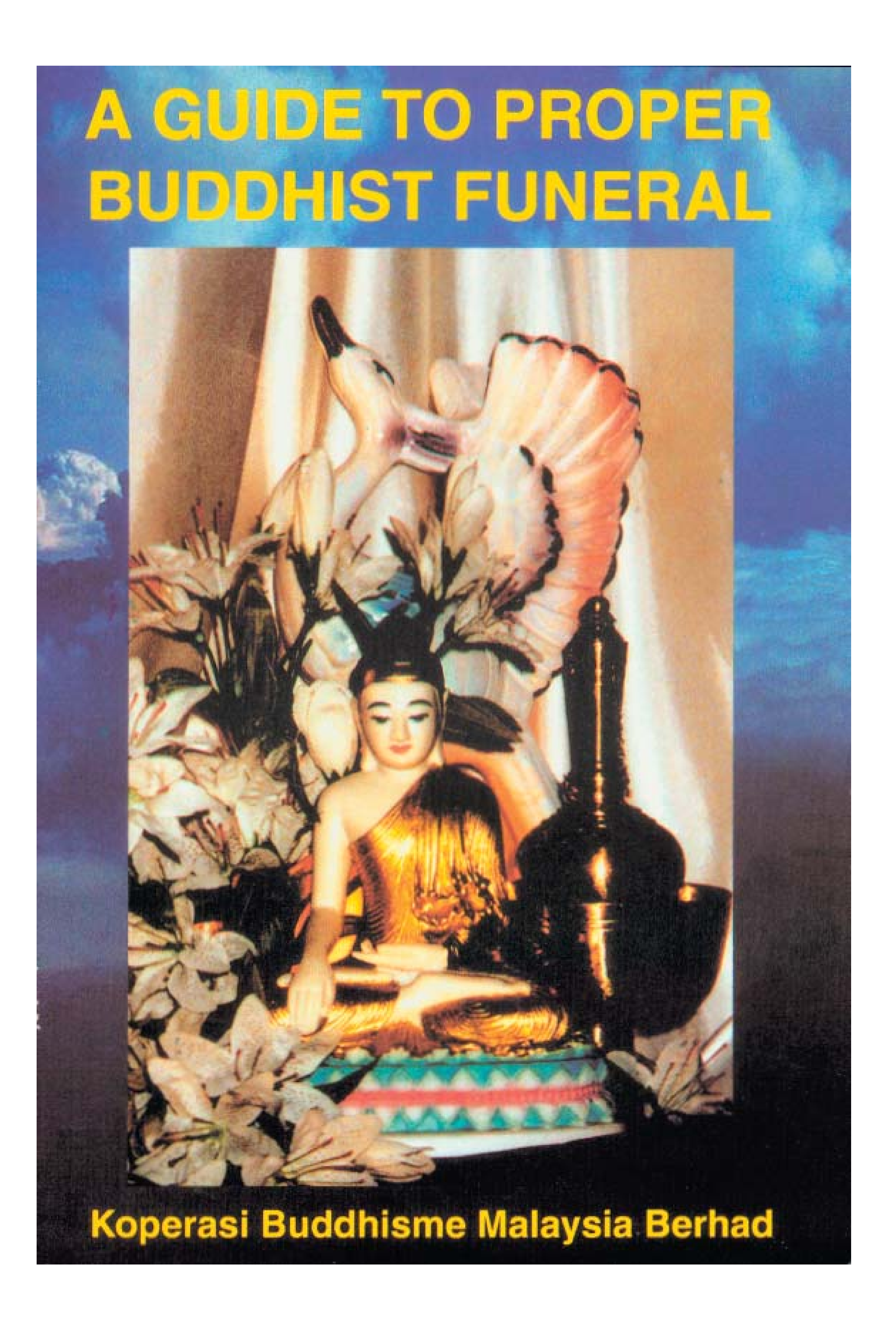
This booklet — as the title implies — is not a scholastic study but a layman's guide to conducting a Proper

Buddhist Funeral. While maintaining the simplicity as taught in the Theravada school, it also incorporates elements of other traditions.

It is a compilation of our experiences and the feedback we received from the many funerals we have helped to conduct.

As a closing note, we would like to extend our sincere appreciation to Venerable Dr. K Sri Dhammananda, Chief Abbot of Brickfields Buddhist Maha Vihara, for painstakingly reading through the script and giving us invaluable suggestions. To Ven. Katapunna, of Bukit Berapit, who kindly consented to go through the first reading. To Bro. Lim Kim Sim for correcting grammatical errors. Finally, to all those who had sacrificed precious time to chant and console those in their moments of grief.




A GUIDE TO PROPER BUDDHIST FUNERAL
Koperasi Buddhisme Malaysia Berhad

Contents



Section One

Things To Be Done When A Family Member Is Critically Ill

Overcoming our own fear and attachment. The best way to help someone who is dying is to help them to have a positive, peaceful mind. That means being free of disturbing emotions such as fear, anger, attachment, depression, etc. To be able to help someone else achieve such a state of mind, we need to work on our own state of mind, i.e. work on reducing our own fear, etc. If we have disturbing emotions regarding death it will be very difficult to help another person to overcome theirs.

In the case of a loved one, it's best to learn to let them go. Clinging to them will cause both our minds and the mind of the dying to be disturbed. It is best to be calm and peaceful; willing to listen to whatever they wish to say; be kind and sensitive and supportive, but try to avoid strong emotional reactions.

The dying person, too, should be made to **accept death as a natural and inevitable phenomenon,** reflecting that all of us come according to our *kamma* (deeds) and we have to go according to our *kamma*.

Sabbe sattā maranti ca, marimsu ca marissare,
Tethevāham marssāmi, natthi me ettha samsayo.

All kinds of beings surely come to death, they have always died, will always die, in the same way I shall surely die, doubt about this does not exist in me.

He should constantly be made to **reflect on the good deeds** that he has done, and be reassured that these wholesome deeds of his would lead him to good rebirth and support him in his next life.

> *Kammassakomhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu kammapatisarano, Yam kammam karissāmi kalyānam vā pāpakam vā tassa dāyādo bhavissāmiti.*
>
> Due to the law of kamma, we are their Maker, their Heir, their Birthplace, their Attachment and their Pathway. We are destined to receive the results of what we have done, both good and evil.

Family members may **reassure** the dying person that he need not worry about them, that he should keep his mind calm and peaceful, and that it is all right to go when his time has come.

Give donations and **do** other **meritorious deeds** in the name of the sick and share the merit with him. If possible, get him personally involved in the meritorious act, or else the act should be acknowledged by him.

> *ldha nandati, pecca nandati, katapunno ubhayattha nandati; punnam me katan ti nandati, bhiyyo nandati suggatim gato.*

> Here he is happy, thereafter he is happy. In both states the well doer is happy. "Good have I done" (thinking thus), he is happy. Furthermore is he happy, having gone to a blissful state. Dh.18.

If the dying person has faith in the Buddha *Sasana*, a small Buddha image, Kuan Yin or some other bodhisatta which the sick person has faith in, may be place strategically by the bedside as an **object for contemplation** (a constant reminder of the noble qualities the icons represent).

Chanting of parittas (protective verses) by either monks or laymen could be organised to comfort the dying person and the family members.

He should be encouraged to **take refuge in the Buddha**, **the Dhamma and the Sangha**. Monks could be invited for breakfast or lunch *dana* (offering of food) and gifts *(dana)* in the form of requisites could be prepared for him to offer to the Sangha.

If the dying person had been practising meditation, remind him of the **importance of mindfulness**. Encourage him to constantly note the arising and falling of events.

> 'True it is, true it is householder, that your body is sickly, soiled and cumbered. For householder, who would claim even a moment's health, carrying this body about, except through sheer foolishness? Therefore, householder, thus you should train yourself: "Though my body is sick,

my mind shall not be sick, thus, householder, must you train yourself."' S,XXII,1

Dhamma friends who are practicers of meditation can be invited to **radiate metta (loving-kindness) to ease the suffering of the sick person**. In their absence you, too, can do it by yourself. Sitting in a comfortable posture, first radiate metta to yourself, then to the sick person. You may mentally use words like, "May you be well and happy, may you be free from suffering, may you be in good health, may you be at peace". Feel the peaceful compassion from your mind envelop and penetrate that of the sick person. Feel the vibrations that come with the compassion, enveloping the sick person's body.

Helping someone who is not a Buddhist. If the dying person belongs to another religion or has little faith in the Buddha Sasana, encourage them to have faith, to pray, to have positive thoughts, etc. in accordance with their religious beliefs and practices. Don't try to impose your own belief to try to convert them, as this may give rise to confusion in the mind of the dying.

If the person has no religion, but seems to be open-minded, you can try to talk about the Dhamma, for example, about loving-kindness and compassion, about the truth of impermanence, about the Four Noble Truths, etc. You can try to talk about the Buddha, taking refuge in the Triple Gem, etc., but be sensitive… don't

be pushy, otherwise the person could become negative. If the person has no interest in religious or spiritual matters, find ways to talk to them that will help them to be free of anger, attachment, fear, etc., and to have a positive, peaceful state of mind.

Notes

Most people are afraid of death because they feel uncertain of the future. If one is not an ariyan (saint,) there is still the chance of rebirth in hell. Though we do not wish to be reborn in a woeful plane, there may be deeds performed in the past which can still cause rebirth in hell. It is useless to think of hell with aversion and fear, but the thought of hell is helpful when it reminds us to cultivate *kusala* (wholesomeness) at this moment instead of *akusala* (unwholesomeness).

In the Samyutta Nikaya (Maha-vagga, Kindred Saying on Stream Winning, Chapter VI, par. 4, Visiting the sick) we find the Buddha advising Mahanama about how a wise lay-follower, who is sick, may be admonished by another wise lay-follower.

'A discreet (*sotapanno* — one who has attain the first stage of sainthood) lay disciple, Mahanama, who is sick… should be admonished by another discreet lay-disciple with the four comfortable assurances, thus: "Take comfort, dear sir, in your unwavering loyalty to the Buddha, saying: He is the Exalted One, Arahant, fully enlightened One. Take comfort, dear sir, in your unwavering loyalty to the Dhamma…. Take comfort, dear sir, in your unwavering loyalty to the Sangha…. Take comfort, dear sir, in your possession of the virtues dear to the Ariyans…." A discreet lay-disciple, Mahanama, who is sick… should be admonished by another discreet lay-disciple with these four comfortable assurances.

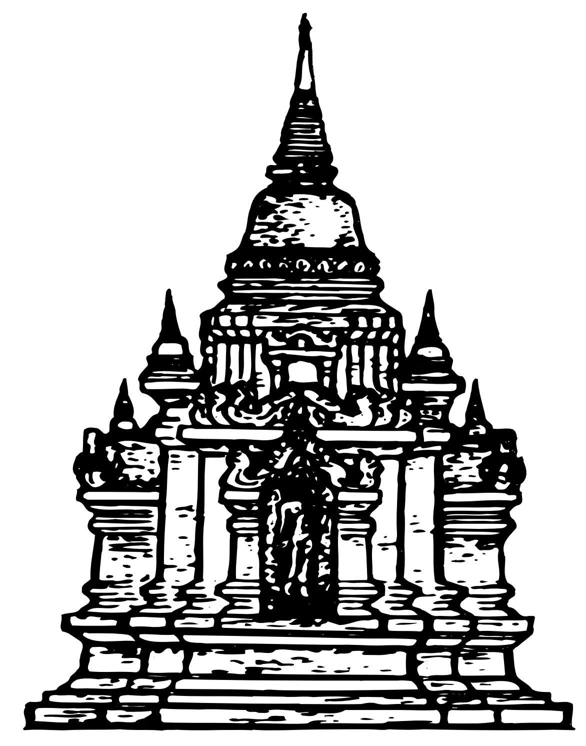
Then, supposing he has longing for his parents, he should thus be spoken to:

If he says, 'I have longing for my parents,' the other should reply, 'But, my dear sir, you are subject to death. Whether you feel longing for your parents or not, you will have to die. 'It will be just as well for you to abandon the longing you have for your parents.'

…longing for children …longing for five human pleasures of sense, …longing for heavenly delights… etc.

Then, if the sick man's thoughts are so fixed, let the other say, 'My friend, even the Brahma World is impermanent, not lasting, prisoned in a person. Well for you, friend, if you raise your mind above the Brahma World and fix it on cessation from the person pack (five aggregates).

And if the sick man says he has done so, then, Mahanama, I declare that there is no difference between the lay-disciple who thus avers and the monk whose heart is freed from the *asavas*, that is, between the release of the one and the release of the other."



Section Two

The Final Moments

According to the Buddha's teaching, when death is about to occur, when volitional control by the mind is weak, the powerful event in the ebbing life, or of an earlier life, thrusts itself forward and is recalled in one of the six senses, suitably: as the Immoral or Moral thought of the act *(Kamma);* or as a symbol of that Act *(Kamma Nimitta)* such as the gift in the act of giving, or knife in the act of murder; or as some sign of the coming existence such as fires or music and are called the Sign of Destiny *(Gati Nimitta).* They are known as the Death Signs.

It is during these hours of confusion, especially if the signs are not favourable, that we can play an important role in re-establishing the dying person's confidence *(saddha)* in the Triple Gem. Verse two of the *Dhammapada* relates a very interesting story of a boy called *Mattakundali,* who on the verge of death had the rare opportunity of seeing the Buddha in person. Seeing the Buddha he was pleased, and dying with a pure heart, full of faith in the Buddha, he was born in a heavenly state.

In the hope of **conducing** any of t**he six senses** that are still receptive **to wholesome states of mind**, monks and Dhamma friends could again be invited

to the home or hospital to recite appropriate *suttas* and radiate thoughts of loving-kindness to ease the suffering and arouse the confidence of the dying person.

If the service (*puja*) is being held at home and if it does not cause irritation or discomfort to the dying person, candles, oil lamp and incense could also be lit at the makeshift altar. If the person is still conscious, the three refuges and five precepts should be administered to him.

If the situation permits and the dying person's clothing is soiled, he should be **cleansed and his clothes changed**. This is to make him feel fresh and comfortable prior to his passing away.

Though it is understandable that there will be some grieving and sorrow it is important that we remain calm in the face of grief. We should **restrain** ourselves from weeping and wailing before the dying person. This will only upset the sick person making it more difficult for him to depart.

You should not suppress your grief by force, ignore or deny its existence, but on the contrary you are encouraged to acknowledge it and **through mindfulness and wise reflection**, gain self-composure.

NOTE:

If someone dies in an accident or in great pain, it does not necessarily mean that he is destined to be reborn in the woeful planes of existence. Though there may be *akusala cittas* (unwholesome

thoughts moments) with aversion when pain arises, but the last thought moments might, due to wise attention (*yoniso manasikara*), still be wholesome.

We read in the 'Anguttara Nikaya' (Book of the Sixes, Chapter Vl, par. 2, Phagguna) that the Buddha visited the Venerable Phagguna, who was very ill. Phagguna had attained the second stage of enlightenment (*Sakadagami*); he was not yet completely freed from the 'five lower fetters':

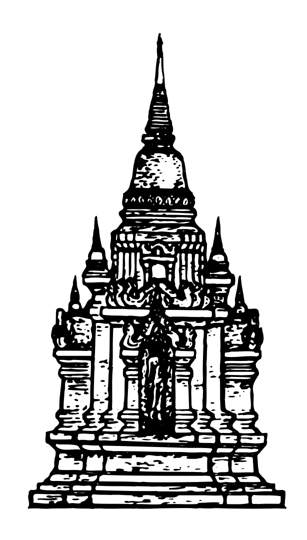
When asked about his well being, he said:

"Lord I can neither bear up nor keep going; my aches and pains grow grievously more, not less; and there are signs of their growing more not less.

Lord the violent ache that racks my head is just as though some lusty fellow chopped at it with a sharp-edged sword; Lord I can neither bear up nor keep going; my pains grow more, not less…."

So the Exalted One instructed him, roused him, gladdened him and comforted him with Dhamma-talk then rose from his seat and departed.

Not long after the Exalted One's departure, the Venerable Phagguna died; and at the time of his death his faculties were completely purified.



Section Three

When Death Takes Place

Aciram vatāyam kāyo pathavim adhisessati
Chuddo apetavinnāno niraṭṭham va kalingaram

Annicā vata sankhārā, uppādavayadhammino
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti, tesam vupassamo sukho.

Before long, alas! This body will be laid on the earth, discarded, devoid of consciousness, and useless like a log of wood.

Transient, alas! are all component things, subject are they to birth and decay; having gained birth to death the life flux swings — bliss truly dawns when unrest dies away.

If the deceased had previously pledged to **donate** his cornea or other **organs,** the relevant authorities (hospitals) should be notified within 3 hours (*ed*. immediately?) upon death, to fulfil the deceased's wish.

Rather than depending on strangers, family members are encouraged to **clean and dress the body of the deceased.** Such an act of filial piety is most meaningful because the body of the deceased is being handled gently with the greatest love and respect. There is

no need to dress the deceased in special clothing ("shou yi") nor is it necessary to adorn it with jewellery, simple clothing like the ones which the deceased normally wear will do. This is because the deceased has already taken rebirth and will not be able to take anything along with him.

> *Na miyyamānam dhanamanveti kinci.*
>
> Even a piece of coin cannot follow its possessor.

Old clothes (or cotton wool provided by the undertaker) can be **placed inside the coffin**, not for the deceased to take along with him to the nether world, but to absorb the moisture.

There is **no need to turn one's back towards the deceased** as he is being lowered into the casket, or as his casket is taken into the hearse, crematorium or grave. The deceased is our loved one and we ourselves should, in the first place, be placing his body gently into the casket, or looking on with respect as it is being done so by others. To turn away and show one's back to the deceased would be a mark of disrespect.



Section Four

Preparing For The Funeral

As an expression of bereavement and filial piety, a Buddhist funeral should be simple, solemn and dignified. It is not necessary to spend lavishly on meaningless traditional ceremonies. Rites and rituals that contradict the Buddha's Teachings should be abandoned. Instead, the money allocated for such purpose could be wisely donated to worthy causes such as to charity, etc. and the merits transferred to the departed.

The hall or the place where the body lies for the wake **should appear serene and peaceful**.

Be **practical when choosing the casket**. It need not be expensive and beyond one's means.

An altar can be set up **in front of the casket** and the deceased's portrait placed before it. On the altar can be placed offerings such as flowers, fruits, candles and incense. Bouquets, wreaths and banners given by friends and relatives can also be displayed modestly in the funeral hall.

A Buddha image should also be set up in front of or beside the deceased's altar as an indication that the deceased has taken refuge in the triple gem.

There is **no need** for family members to display their remorse by **donning black or coarse clothing**. White or some plain, sober colour would be more appropriate to reflect the sombreness of the occasion.

Monks can be invited **to perform the Buddhist rites and deliver sermons suitable for the occasion.** In their absence, mourners, friends and members of Buddhist organisations may also conduct such services. Off-session audiocassettes or similar chanting could be played. Chanting should be for practical reasons, such as to contemplate on the impermanence of life and for the purpose of transference of merit, but not as mere tradition.

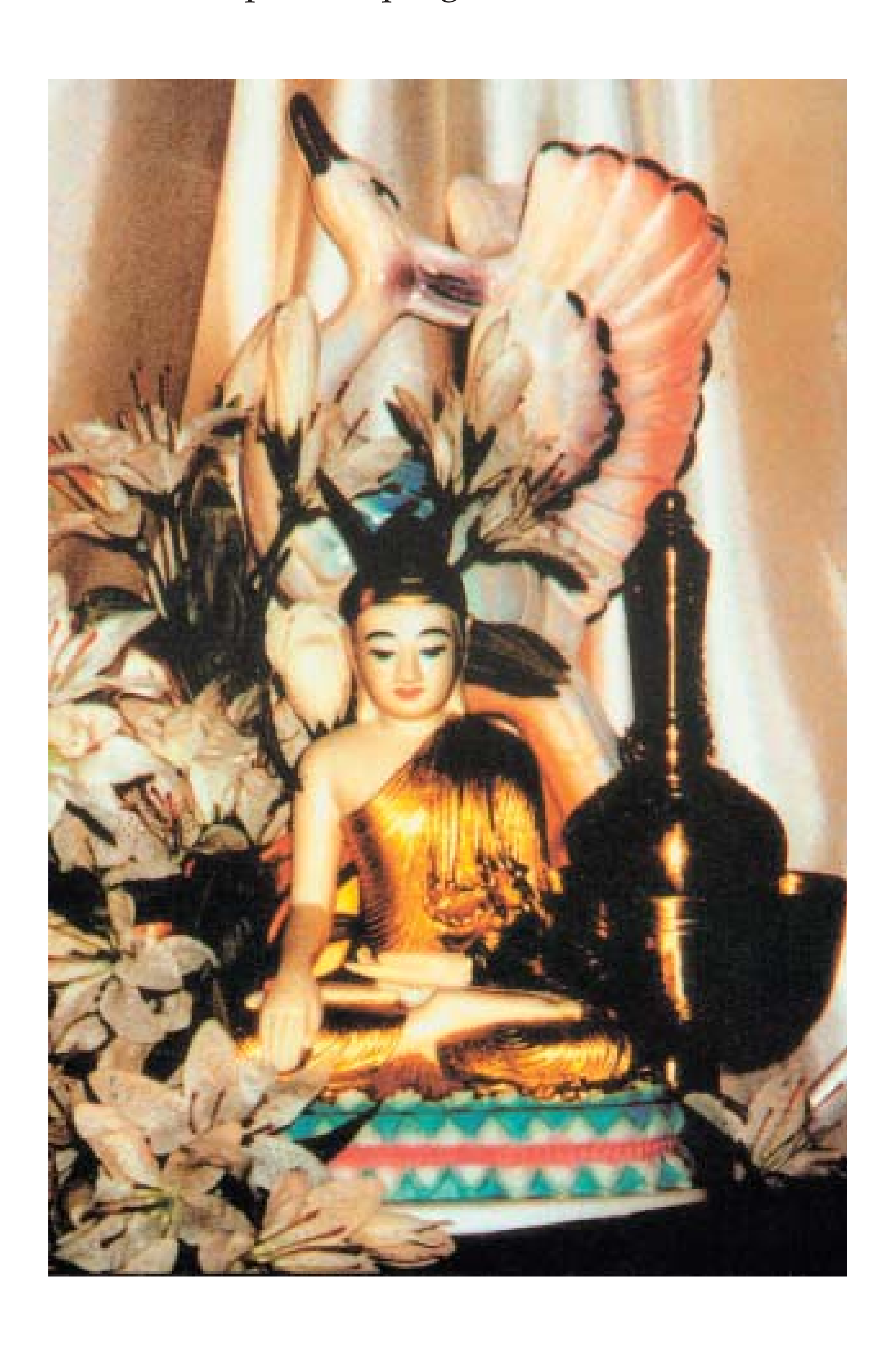
Notes

Buddhism generally does not have anything against the practice of local customs and traditions if they do not violate the Buddhist Precepts. In many Buddhist countries local culture has successfully evolved, found new meaning, assimilated into and become a part of the Buddhist practice for that country. Only when the people accept the teachings of the Buddha into their daily life, and are able to express their devotion to the dhamma, and relate the principles of Buddhist doctrine to their own social and cultural needs, can Buddhism be said to have been firmly established in that society.

As for Buddhist funerals, the Buddha did not in any way prohibit lay followers from outwardly expressing their filial piety and respect for the deceased through the practice of local customs.

'Hinder not yourselves, Ananda, by honouring the remains of the Tathagata. Be zealous, I beseech you, Ananda, in your own behalf! Devote yourselves to your own good! …There are wise men, Ananda, among the nobles, among the brahmins, among the heads of houses, who are firm believers in the Tathagata; and they will do due honour to the remains of the Tathagata." D.ii.140.

What is being criticised is the observance of meaningless and wasteful rites and rituals, which are founded not on moral or ethical values but instead on utter superstition. Such meaningless practices are not only a waste of financial resources but such a deeply rooted belief (that only through such practices one can achieve liberation from suffering) will itself become an impediment for one's own spiritual progress.



Verses for Contemplation

Short, alas, is the life of man, limited and fleeting, full of pain and torment. One should wisely understand this, do good deeds and lead a holy life, for no mortals ever escape death.

Just as the dewdrop, at the point of the grass-blade at sunrise, very soon vanishes and does not remain for long: just so is the dew drop-like life of men very short and fleeting.

Just as at the pouring down of a mighty rain, the bubbles on the water very soon vanish and do not remain for long: just so is the bubble-like life of men very short and fleeting.

Just as a furrow drawn with a stick in the water very soon vanishes and does not remain for long: just so is the furrow-like life of men very short and fleeting.

Just as the cattle for slaughter, whatever their footing, stand on the brink of death, just so is the life of men very short and fleeting.

One should wisely understand this, do good deeds and lead a holy life, for no mortal ever escapes death.

The Buddha, Anguttara Nikaya

Section Five

Paying Last Respects

When paying their respects, guests should stand straight in front of the altar, and bow with hands clasped together or observe a moment of silence. It is not necessary to offer joss sticks.

Guests should, if they are able to, join the mourners in the chanting. Otherwise, they should observe silence and if need be speak softly, especially when a chanting session is on. Having a gambling session at the pretence of passing time is certainly distasteful and a clear sign of disrespect.

Out of respect for the Dhamma, you should remove your head coverings (hat or cap), when the Dhamma is being recited or a sermon is being delivered. Unless you are sick or because of old age, it is also considered disrespectful if you take a seat higher than the monks or are seated while the monks are standing. (cf. Vin. Sekhiyavatta; Dhammadesanapatisamyutta).



Section Six

The Final Rite

"Adāsi me akāsi me nātimitta sakhā ca me, Petanam dakkhinam dajjā pubbe katamanussaram. Na hi runnam va soko vā. Yā vannā paridevanā. Na tam petanam atthaya, evam titthanti nātayo. Ayanca kho dakkhinā dinnā sanghamhi supatitthitā digharattam hitāyassa thānaso upakappati. So nātidhammo ca ayam nidassito petāna pujā ca katā ulārā, balanca bhikkhunamanupadinnam, tumhehi punnam pasutam anappakanti."

"Having recalled that such and such persons, who used to be our relatives and friends, had kindly given this to us or had kindly done this to us, such relatives and friends should perform the rites for the deceased. They should not weep or lament with grief, since to do so would do nothing good for the deceased, who will remain as they are.

The offerings that you have done, that have been well established in the *Sangha,* will go to benefit the deceased for a long time within the range of possibility (in each case).

A great merit you have done in performing your duties as their relatives, in worshipping the

> deceased through this fruitful kind of worship and in strengthening the *Bhikkhus* in doing so."

The final rite for a Buddhist should be simple and meaningful. The *Tirokuddha Sutta,* as quoted above, clearly states the duties of a Buddhist during a funeral.

The **choice of cremation or burial is strictly a personal** choice and there is also no restraint on how long the body should lay in state before the funeral.

On the morning of the burial or cremation, monks can be invited to conduct the last rite. The rite begins with the **going for refuge and the observance of the Five Precepts.**

The monks will then chant contemplative verses, which end with *annica vata sankhara….*

If monks cannot be present at the burial or cremation site, the *Pamsukula* robe(s) are presented here or else it will be presented only at the burial ground or crematorium. (The family may, if they wish to, also present other requisites.)

At the end of this ceremony (i.e. after the robes and requisites have been presented) it is important that the transference of merit be carried out in memory of one's departed kin. This is done by reciting the following Pali verses:

Idam me nātinam hotu, sukhitā hontu nātayo.
Idam me nātinam hotu, sukhitā hontu nātayo.
Idam me nātinam hotu, sukhitā hontu nātayo.

The monks will then reciprocate by reciting verses of thanksgiving *(anumodana).*

> *Yatha vārivahā purā paripurenti sāgaram. Evameva ito dinnam petānam upakappati. Icchitam patthitam tumham khippameva samijjhatu. Sabbe purentu sankappā cando pannaraso yathā mani jotiraso yathā.*
>
> Just as the full flowing rivers fill the ocean, even so what is given from here accrues to the departed. Whatever you wished or wanted may it quickly be. May all your wishes be fulfilled as the moon upon the fifteenth day, or as the wish-fulfilling gem.

The casket is then sealed. When lifting the casket on to the hearse, the deceased's family members may if they wish to, participate actively, since this is the last opportunity to do service to the bodily remains of the deceased. At this moment of time we should all observe a minute of silence as last respects to the deceased.

The funeral procession should be orderly and silent. Family members will normally walk behind the hearse as a mark of sending off the deceased. Participants in this last journey should contemplate on impermanence of life and radiate thoughts of loving-kindness (*metta*) to the members of the deceased family.

Notes

The pamsukula cloth/robe

In Thailand the *Pamsukula* cloth mentioned above, is sometimes referred to as the *Sattapakarana* cloth (Thai: *Sadappakorn*) in connection with the recitation of the seven *Abhidhamma* pali verses. The process of 'drawing' (i.e. receiving) the cloth, following the Thai tradition, consists of a length of ceremonial thread or a long strip of cloth from the coffin or the urn to the area where the Bhikkhus are seated. The host or hostess places the cloths (or robes) on the thread or the strip. The Bhikkhus touch the cloths with their right hands and recite the pali passage used on the occasion:

Aniccā vata sankhārā uppādavayadhammino
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti tesan vupasamo Sukho.

> Impermanent are the *Sankhāras*, being naturally subject to birth and decline. Having taken birth, they are destined to extinction. Blessed is it to have them tranquil.

In case the cloth (or robes) is placed on or under the coffin and a Bhikkhu recites the said passages at (i.e. closest to the coffin) while taking the robe from the thread or strip placed for the purpose. It is *Mahāpansukula*, the Great Pamsukula cloth. There is a record in the Canon related to the Life of the Buddha (Vi.Maha. 4/53/41) saying to the effect that the Buddha himself, while attempting to convert the fire-worshipping hermit Uruvela Kassapa, at the Uruvela district, did not so formally or ceremoniously do this. Without further ado he went straight to the corpse on a charnel ground, pulled out the piece of cloth wrapping it, then washed, dyed and cut it to form a robe for himself.

In the Sri Lankan traditions this rite is known as "offering

of cloth on behalf of the deceased" (*mataka-vastra pujā*). The offering of robes or white cloth is offered directly to the monks by one of the family members prior to the cremation or the burial of the body. There is no hard and fast rule for many of these procedures. One can adjust and modify accordingly.

After the offerings have been made to the monks, the monks give thanks (*anumodanā*). Right at the start of the thanksgiving, the lay leader or host will perform the *dakkhinodaka*, or pouring the water of dedication, which is actually an ancient Indian gesture of giving (V 1:39 307). The lay leader pours the dedication water over the index finger (of either hand), whilst dedicating a share of the merit or *punna* to his or her departed ones. Verses such as *Idam no natinam hotu, sukhita hontu natayo* are normally recited on such occasions.

Traditionally, the act of pouring the dedication water on the ground is a re-enactment of the ascetic Siddhartha's calling the earth to "witness" his store of merit when, on the day before the Enlightenment, Mara the Evil One, in an attempt to distract the Bodhisatta from his spiritual path, charged that the Bodhisatta had done no good deeds in the past to merit him the seat under the Bodhi tree. The Bodhisatta simply touched the ground `calling the earth to witness'. The whole earth, it is said, then shook and thundered in witness of the Bodhisatta's goodness, and Mara was routed (J 1:74).

The earth represents the devotee's store of merit: like the earth, one's merit is always there to witness that one has done works of merit, even when there are no other living witnesses. The tree represents the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha sat. It is as if one is calling the Buddha to witness one's meritorious deed too. In other words, the pouring of the dedication water under a tree represents the Bodhisatta's struggle against evil and the Buddha's triumph over it.

Section Seven

The Burial/Cremation Ceremony

If monks are present, they will again chant suttas befitting the occasion, after which pamsukula robes are offered, and the merits transferred.

Else, family members and friends of the deceased may conduct the ceremony; after which the casket is lowered for burial or placed into the furnace.

If the body is cremated, the ashes can only be collected the following day. The family may, as they wish, choose to enshrine it in a columbarium, pagoda, or scatter it at sea.

Occasions such as the completion of the grave, the installation of the urn into the columbarium, or the scattering of the ashes at sea are — from the Theravada standpoint — a personal matter. Though not necessary, the family may, if they choose, invite monks to chant, or they themselves can conduct a simple puja to mark the occasion.

The money contributed by relatives and friends to the deceased's family as a token of condolence can either be used to defray the funeral expenses or, better still, be offered for religious activities and other charitable bodies in memory of the deceased. The merit so gained can be transferred to the departed one.

With this the funeral rites come to a close.

Section Eight

Memorial Service

The third, seventh, forty-ninth and one hundredth day are days customarily observed for performing a religious service for the deceased. Though Buddhism does not stipulate any specific day for Memorial Service one can skilfully adopt these days or the weekend nearest to it as days for a Memorial Service. Monks can be invited to the house for *dana* or arrangements can be made to hold it at the monastery. After the *dana* it is important that the merits gained through the offering be transferred to the deceased so as to enable him to be swiftly reborn into the Realms of Happiness.

It is normal practice for one to invite friends to participate when one does Sanghika Dana in memory of the deceased. When we are doing something wholesome, we must not do that privately, but instead make it known to others and encourage them to join in the merit making. Even if they do not offer anything, there is still wholesomeness in appreciating other people's good deeds. In this way we are doing our bit in helping other people develop wholesomeness.



Notes

The most important aspect in a Buddhist funeral rite is the offerings of dana to the *Maha Sangha* and the subsequent transference of merit.

The Buddha confirmed that the dedication of merits resulting from a wholesome deed to the departed next-of-kin, who might have been reborn in an unfortunate state, is the true and effectual way of helping them overcome their defects and later gain a good rebirth.

Performance of alms-giving to the unsurpassable field of merit; i.e. the *Maha Sangha*, is the best way for the cultivation of merits necessary to bring the most effective results to the departed next-of-kin *petas*. The efficacy of this practice was proven many a time during the Buddha's life as documented in the *Petavatthu*.

The *pamsukula* rite, or the last rite for the Buddhist, is actually a re-enactment of an incident that took place during the life of the Buddha.

At a time when the Blessed One was proceeding to Rajagaha, King Bimbisara (who had tried to offer his kingdom to the Bodhisatta earlier) went to visit him with thousands of brahmins. After hearing the Dhamma, King Bimbisara was on that very day established in the fruit of Sotapatti. He then invited the Buddha to a meal in the palace on the following day.

During the alms-giving the departed next-of-kin *petas* of King Bimbisara stood outside the walls of the palace thinking. "The king will dedicate the merits of the almsgiving to us."

However, after the alms-giving King Bimbisara neglected to dedicate the merits of the merit-making to his departed next-of-kin *petas*, as he was pre-occupied about choosing a suitable site to built a vihara for the Buddha. Not receiving the merits, the *petas*

made dreadful cries and wailing outside the palace walls in the dead of the night.

The king heard this 'unearthly' noise and became very frightened. At daybreak the king told the Buddha about his dreadful experience and asked what would become of him. The Buddha explained to the king: "Former relatives of yours who have been reborn as *petas* have been going round for an immeasurable long time since the last Buddha *kappa* (Buddha Phussa's time, about 92 kappas ago) expecting to be released from their suffering.

They had expected you to dedicate to them the alms-giving done yesterday, but you did not. They were extremely distressed by this and lamented their lost hope." The king said, 'O Blessed One, would they received the merits if I give alms today and dedicated the merits to them?"

The Buddha replied in the affirmative and King Bimbisara then took the initiative to perform the rites for the deceased called *Dakkhinaupadana* in Buddhism. He invited the Buddha and a number of Bhikkhus to have a meal within his royal palace. During the alms-giving to the Buddha and the Order of *Ariya Sangha*, strange things happened. The Buddha, using his supernormal powers, caused the *petas* from outside the walls of the palace to be clearly seen by the king.

As the king gave the gift of water saying, "Let this be for my relatives!" at that moment, lotus ponds appeared around the *petas*. The *petas* bathed in them and their weariness and thirst was allayed; their bodies became the colour of gold. The king gave rice gruel and both hard and soft food and dedicated these actions.

All at once, the *petas* had food to eat and their faculties were refreshed. The king gave robes and lodging and dedicated these actions. Instantly, the *petas* were richly adorned and they had well-furnished palaces to live in. The king was extremely delighted by what he did and saw the effects.

Causes for Birth as a peta

Beings are called *peta* because they are stationed far from happiness. *Peta* = pa + ita; lit, departed beings, or (those) absolutely devoid of happiness. They are not disembodied spirits or ghosts Although they possess material forms, generally they are invisible to the physical eye. They have no plane of their own but live in forests, dirty surroundings, etc.

Greed, hatred and delusion (*lobha, dosa, moha*) provide the basis of actions. As a result of actions born of these, one is not reborn among either men, gods, or in any other state of bliss, but in sorrowful states of existence like *Pettivisaya*, etc. (A.111.335) *Petas* live a life of misery generally, subject to incessant pain and suffering.

The offering of *Pamsukula* (i.e. offering of cloth) when a person dies, is to enable the dead person (in case he or she has been reborn as a naked *Peta*), to obtain garments to cover his or her nakedness. And, among these, only those *Petas* born in the *Paradattupa-Jivi* Peta world are able to receive and share in the Merits of the good deeds of their relatives and loved ones.

Will the Departed Relatives of a Person be able to partake of the merits accruing out of alms given for their sake?

A Brahmin named Janussoni once approached the Buddha, asking how departed relatives would be able to yield the results of alms given in dedication to them.

In reply, the Buddha said that there are conditions or occasions on which such dedication is sometimes possible and at other times not.

Regarding the latter category (i.e. not possible), this refers to two kinds of beings. Firstly, those who have done heavy unwholesome or evil acts (*Akusala Kammapatha*) and have taken birth as hellish beings or animals. Secondly, those who have abstained from such evil acts and have been born to the world of celestial or human beings once again. These kinds of beings live on the 'food' of their own planes and as such are not in the position to appreciate and enjoy the meritorious fruits so dedicated.

Again, the Brahmin asked if, in cases where the relative did not take birth in the planes of hungry ghosts (*peta*) ,who then would be able to receive the dedication of merit.

The Buddha's reply was that in such a case, other departed relatives would appreciate them. This is because it is impossible that there should not be in that plane any relative whatever (when traced back to the remote past) of the donors.

The Brahmin further asked, "If those beings have taken birth in the realms where appreciation is impossible, is there any other condition to be of some help to them in those realms?"

The Buddha replied to the effect that they would benefit by whatever charity they themselves used to do while on the human plane (i.e. they can only benefit from their past store of good *kamma*). For instance, if they are born as animals such as elephants and horses, they will be fed fairly well with sufficient supply of food and water. If, on the other hand they are born human or celestial beings, they will be provided adequately with whatever they need to live on comfortably.

On the side of the givers or donors, therefore, there can be no loss whatever. 'A gift so given, will not be fruitless, for the givers themselves experience the fruit of such deeds.'

Here, it would be interesting to note that not all *petas* are able to receive the dedication of merit. In an answer given by Ven. Nagasena to King Milinda it is mentioned that three out of the

four classes of *Petas* are unable to receive the merit dedicated to them. These are: (1) the *Petas* who feed on what has been vomited up (*Vantasika*) (2) the *Petas* who suffer from extreme hunger and thirst (*Khuppipasino*), and (3) the *Petas* who always suffer from burning fire, heat, etc. (*Nijjhamatanahika*). Only those who depend on what others give (*Paradattatupa-jivika*), and who remember their living relatives and see what they do, can receive and share in the merits of such offerings. The last type of *peta* is normally reborn in the surroundings of the house, etc. An example would be people who would normally worry; after death they would be reborn as *petas* staying around the house. They would appear to relatives or others as ghosts:

To recapitulate, there are in Buddhism three conditions whereby the rites for the deceased can yield the expected results. They are:

1. The donors or givers are required to make a mental note dedicating the meritorious fruits thereof. There is no problem regarding whether or not the pouring of water is used as a supplementary factor. What counts is the intention or resolution made on the occasion.

2. The deceased who have taken birth in the planes of hungry ghosts, having known and appreciated the sharing or dedication of the fruits of merits.

3. The act of charity is a worthy one, being dispensed towards the persons worthy of the gifts. In Buddhism this refers firstly to the *Bhikkhus*, because they are leading a holy life by serving others to bring them into the correct path, secondly to other persons who are in need of such an act. A gift of this characteristic, with its fruits shared or dedicated, can fulfil the donors' wish.

Appendix

Tirokudda Sutta

The Without-the-walls discourse

Tirokuddesu titthanti sandhisanghātakesu ca
Dvārabāhāsu titthanti āgantvāna sakam gharam.

Without the walls they stand and wait,
And at the junctions and road-forks;
Returning to their erstwhile homes,
They wait beside the jambs of gates.

Pahute annapānamhi khajjabhojje upatthite
Na tesam koci sarati sattānam kammapaccayā.

But when a rich feast is set out
With food and drink of every kind,
The fact that no man does recall
Those creatures stems from their past acts.

Evam dadanti nātinam ye honui anukampakā
Sucim panitam kālena kappiyam pānabhojanam.

So they who are compassionate
At heart do give for relatives
Such drink and food as may be pure
And good and fitting at these times.

Idam vo nātinam hotu, sukhitā hontu nātayo.

The let this be for relatives;
May relatives have happiness.

Te ca tattha samāgantvā nātipetā samāgata
Pahute annapānamhi sakkaccam anumodare.

These ghosts of the departed kin
Foregathered and assembled there
Will eagerly their blessing give
For [plentiful] rich food and drink.

Ciram jivantu no nāti yesam hetu labhāmase
Amhākan ca katā pujā dāyakā ca anipphalā.

So may our relatives live long
Owing to whom we have this gain;
For honour to us has been done,
No giver ever lacked the fruit.

Na hi tattha kasi atthi, gorakk'ettha na vijjati
Vānijjā tādisi, natthi hirannena kayakkayam
Ito dinnena yāpenti petā kālagatā tahim.

For there is never ploughing there,
Nor any cattle herding found,
Nor merchandising just the same,
Nor bartering for coin of gold:
The ghosts of the departed kin
Live there on giving given here.

Unname udakam vattam yatha ninnam pavattati
Evam eva ito dinnam petānam upakappati

As water showered on the hill
Flows down to reach the hollow vale,
So giving given here can serve
The ghosts of the departed kin.
As riverbeds when full can bear
The water down to fill the sea,
So giving given here can serve
The ghosts of the departed kin.

Adāsi me, akāsi me, nātimittā sakhā ca me
Petānam dakkhinam dajjā pubbe katam anussaram

He gave to me, he worked for me,
He was my kin, friend, intimate.
Give gifts, then, for departed ones,
Recalling what they used to do.

Na hi punnam va soko va ya c'anna paridevana
Na tam petanam atthaya, evam titthanti natayo.

No weeping, nor yet sorrowing,
Nor any kind of mourning helps
Departed Ones, whose kin remain
(Unhelpful to them acting) thus.

Ayan ca kho dakkhinā dinnā sanghamhi supatitthita
Digharattam hitāy'assa thānaso upakappati.

But when this offering is given
Well placed in the Community
For them, then it can serve them long
In future and at once as well.

So nātidhammo ca ayam nidassito
Petanam pujā ca katā ulārā
Balan ca bhikkhunam anuppadinnam
Tumehi punnam pasutam anappakanti.

The True Idea for relatives has thus been shown.
And how high honour to departed ones is done
And how the bhikkhus can be given strength as well.
And how great merit can be stored away by you.



References

Buddhism beliefs and practices in Sri Lanka, Lynn De Silva, 1974

Facing Death & Finding Hope, Christine Longaker, Arrow, 1998

Final Gifts, Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelly, Bantam, April 1993.

Forty-five years of the Buddha, H.H. Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara, Bangkok, 1993

How a Theravadin Buddhist Chinese Funeral may be conducted, Venerable Suvanno, Sukhi Hotu Sdn Bhd, 1996

Loving and Dying, Visuddhācāra, Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, 1993

The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rinpoche, Rider, 1998

Beliefs and Practices among Malaysian Chinese Buddhists, Tan Teik Beng, Buddhist Missionary Society, 1988

Dedication Of Merits

May we rejoice in the merits of this Dhamma Dana
and
attain the bliss of Nibbana.

May all brings share in the merits gained,
enjoy good health,
prosperity and happiness.
Cultivate loving-kindness and wisdom,
culminating in the attainment of Nibbana,
the cessation of all suffering.

Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!

